English for Industry and Commerce: A Certificate for Engineering Students

By Paola Falter

This article presents an assessment of ten years' experience with the certificate course in *English for Industry* and *Commerce* offered by the *Fachhochschule München* as an additional language qualification to its applied-sciences students. The *Fachhochschule* is an application-oriented university offering degree courses particularly in Engineering, Design, Business Administration, and Social Studies. It is a relatively young institution, as it was granted its official academic status in Germany only in 1971. At present there are about 140 *Fachhochschulen* in the country. Typically, a degree course at such an institution has a duration of eight semesters; in general, the third and the sixth semesters are devoted to industrial placements. The *Fachhochschule München* (FHM) is located in Munich and currently has about 15,000 students; of these, roughly two-thirds are enrolled in technical degree courses.

Chronology

The FHM has offered English courses since its foundation, although over the years offerings in other languages such as Spanish, French, Italian, Russian, and Japanese have broadened the range of optional classes available. English has always retained a special status from three points of view: there are more courses in English than in any other language, only intermediate and advanced courses are offered (there is no need for beginners' instruction as English is taught at secondary-school level), and English is part of the compulsory curriculum for some degrees (e.g., in Business Administration).

At the beginning of the 1980s, as a result of the globalization of markets, the need was felt to offer applied-sciences students who did not have English in their compulsory curriculum the opportunity to acquire a special qualification in this language. The plan was to equip the students with the general language skills which they would need in the business environment of their future profession, rather than offer them specialization in the technical language of their particular fields of study.

The original idea of an additional qualification in English stemmed from the Bavarian Employers' Association, a body which represented the bulk of the employers of FHM graduates. The General Studies Department of the FHM reacted to the Association's suggestion by submitting a proposal for a Special Certificate in English for Industry and Commerce (*Zusatzqualifikation Englisch in Wirtschaft und Industrie*) to the Ministry of Culture and Education. This step was necessary for formal reasons (curriculum definition), and because resources (staff, infrastructure) would have to be approved for the project.

In 1984 the Bavarian Ministry of Culture and Education agreed to the proposal, and granted the venture the status of a Pilot Project for the following five years, until 1989. During this time success was closely monitored and the programme repeatedly adjusted. For example, initially only students of the Engineering faculties had been admitted to the programme, but it turned out that it would make sense to admit students from the Design faculties too (Business Administration students already had English in their curriculum, and Social Studies students were expected to have different professional requirements). Regular reports were sent to the Ministry. At the end of the pilot phase the Certificate became a permanent feature of the FHM.

The first Certificates were issued in 1988. Over the past ten years, some 300 Certificates in English for Industry and Commerce have been issued. During any semester there are about 1,300 students enrolled in the programme; of these, about 250 attend the certificate courses offered in that semester; at present, 15 certificates on the average are issued at the end of each semester.

Programme Structure

The programme consists of the eight courses listed in Figure 1. Each course is taught in the form of one 90-minute class per week for the duration of one semester. With an average semester length of 13 weeks, instruction adds up to 208 hours for the whole programme.

The courses are numbered from I to VIII for convenience, but as the last column of the table shows, their numbers do not correspond to a linear sequence as far as admission is concerned. There is a practical reason for this. If the courses had to be taken from I to VIII in sequence, it would be difficult for the students, who come from many faculties and have different schedules, to fit just one course in each of the eight semesters of their degree, even if they made the decision of participating in the programme from their very first semester (which is often not the case). From a teaching point of view, the main advantage of a linear enrollment sequence would be the possibility of setting increasingly higher standards of competence throughout the programme.

The other extreme, leaving the students free to take any one of the eight courses at any time, would have great practical advantages, but would defeat any attempt to attain progress; the standard would have to be the same for all the courses, as each one of them could be the first or the last attended. The admission sequence chosen represents a compromise: some courses (I, V and VI) are open to all students and can be taken at any time, whereas others (II, III, IV and VII, VIII) can only be taken in a sequence. A further advantage of this approach is that several courses can be taken in parallel during the same semester, which can shorten the duration of the programme to a minimum of four semesters. This is a popular option for students who do not join the programme at the beginning of their studies (in fact, they have time until their fourth semester, for then they can still complete the Certificate simultaneously with their degree).

During their degree course, all students are required to pass examinations in three General Studies subjects not directly related to their field of work. The aim of this regulation is to increase the students' general cultural competence. The General Studies Department offers about 200 such courses in such diverse fields as history, psychology, philosophy, literature, media studies, the natural sciences, and modern languages. For students participating in the special

English programme, any three of the Certificate courses, except Oral English I and II (which do not have written examinations), can be taken into account as General Studies subjects; the remaining five have to be taken as voluntary options. This rule achieves a satisfactory compromise between the additional effort required of the students, and the support given by the institution to the programme. This also accounts for the fact that the programme was developed within the General Studies Department.

Contents and Methods

An overview of the contents and methods of the programme is given in Figure 2. This, however, is really only a snapshot of a dynamic situation: just like in any other curriculum, all subject matter and teaching approaches are subject to constant revision and updating. For example, the material used for Courses I and II, which has been continually supplemented by technically up-to-date handouts over the past few years, is to be replaced soon. New materials are currently being tested. Course IV, which is definitely not a commercial correspondence course, used to be taught on the basis of *Business Communication: Practical written English for the business world* (Beresford BBC English 1984), but over the years, material more specifically appropriate to the professional requirements of future *Fachhochschule* graduates has been developed.

At the end of each course there is an examination: a 60-minute written test for courses I to VI, and a 10-15 minute oral test for courses VII and VIII. All the grades obtained in the examinations have the same weight (one-eighth) in the final average. In order to obtain the Certificate, students must pass all examinations. The Certificate is a separate document from the actual degree and specifies the titles of all the courses, the grades obtained in each, the final average grade, and the assessment to which it corresponds (for example, average grades ranging from 1.0 to 1.2 carry the assessment "excellent," grades from 1.3 to 1.5 "very good" and so on).

Courses I to VI are regularly taught by two professors of English. The oral English courses VII and VIII are taught by native speakers, ideally part-time lecturers as the courses are very practice oriented.

Challenges

As the programme had no precedents at any *Fachhochschule* , it was expected that it might present a number of challenges. Predictably enough, no significant problems of a pedagogical nature arose, as course development, assessment, and adjustment belong to the standard activities connected with teaching any subject. The challenges that did have to be faced, however, turned out to be of an administrative kind.

A decision which had to be made right at the beginning concerned the investment in materials and human resources. Obviously there was going to be a trade-off between criteria of economy and effectiveness. Another important consideration was the medium-term feasibility of the project within the facilities of the FHM, which, having been built for 7,000 students and now catering to more than twice as many, was bursting at the seams. In that situation, planning

elaborately equipped classrooms just for the project seemed unrealistic, and it was decided to keep the investment in hardware to a minimum, with materials which could be used in an already existing and occasionally available language lab or simply in any classroom with an overhead projector and a videotape recorder.

By far the bigger investment was made in human resources and concerned class size. Keeping the maximum level of participants down to 10 in any class when the usual size for language courses is 25, means more than halving capacity utilization; this effect is multiplied if several parallel classes are taught. Nevertheless, it was felt that this decision made pedagogical sense for classes that focused on writing and speaking skills, an assumption which has found ample confirmation over the past ten years.

In practice, smaller class sizes in some courses have resulted not only from artificially set ceilings, but also from the need to offer a sufficient number of parallel courses at different times for students of many faculties, while prescribing a given sequence for some of the courses. For example, experience has shown that offering course III (Introduction to Business Communication) in parallel on two different days is sufficient to meet the demand; but, as this course can only be taken by the students who have already passed the tests in courses I and II, the two classes tend to be smaller than the maximum possible size. Even if there are only 25 candidates for the course (which sometimes happens), two courses must be offered, as the students cannot all attend at the same time. This seems to be a small point, but it has significant consequences for long-term capacity planning.

A corollary of this situation is the need to offer the courses at times which are realistic for all the students. This means that those who start the programme must be able to complete it. Each of the starting courses (I, V and VI) must be offered at least three times in parallel, on different days. The more students join the programme, the better the (teaching) capacity will be utilized in the more advanced courses, even if the dropout rate never exceeds 10 percent. The best times for the higher courses have turned out to be late in the afternoon, from 4:30 to 8 p.m. At these times, even students who are doing an industrial placement locally can attend. Of course, participants who have been working or attending lectures since the early morning are tired at these times, but then, they are particularly motivated to work towards the Certificate. At any rate, the need to keep classrooms free at certain times for the Certificate students can be a constraint on the scheduling of all lectures in a faculty.

The great interest shown by the students for the programme from the very beginning soon resulted in a new challenge: setting up and managing the database. During the first six semesters card files were used to keep track of the subjects taken and the exams passed by each student. Subsequently, when it became necessary to prepare detailed documentation for the Registrar's Office to issue the certificates, a computer database program was used. Since the secretarial staff of the department could not be burdened with this additional work, the activities involved were taken over by one of the two professors teaching the course (one hour's relief per semester was allocated to this function).

Finally, a problem arose from the fact that the numbering of the courses does not correspond to the sequence in which they can be taken. Throughout the Pilot Phase, students tended to crowd

Course I, but to postpone taking V or VI, believing that the numbers corresponded to a level of difficulty. Furthermore, the rather complex sequence of the courses tended to be misunderstood by students and staff alike, so that intensive counselling on the part of those in charge of the programme was necessary. At the time, various experiments were made with different course coding and sequence plans, but none of these was really satisfactory. It was therefore decided to keep the status quo, but to undertake a broad information campaign by distributing leaflets, posting info sheets in many different places, publishing regular bulletins in the students' information magazine, and holding frequent counselling sessions. In addition, it was planned to run courses which must be taken in a sequence (e.g., II and III), at the same time on the same day, as long, obviously, as they are not taught by the same person, in order to avoid inadvertent "illegal" enrollment. This strategy has proved effective and, over the years, has been strengthened by word-of-mouth advertising of the programme participants.

Benefits

For an application-oriented institution like the *Fachhochschule* , it is important to assess the results of the kind of programme presented here not only in terms of student acceptance and teacher satisfaction, but also with respect to the impact it has on the job prospects of the graduates. Programme graduates have been asked from the beginning to provide feedback to the FHM on their career experience with particular reference to the Certificate. Such reports, although too irregular for a statistically representative quantitative analysis, have indicated that having the Certificate can significantly improve job prospects, particularly for students who also have good grades in their main subject. At times of an economic boom, as was the case at the end of the eighties, this means a higher starting salary. In more difficult phases of the business cycle, like at the time of writing, the Certificate may simply make the difference between being offered a job and being turned down.

Of course, the correlation between professional success and the Certificate should be put in its right perspective. The students who decide to participate in this largely optional programme are arguably high achievers anyway, who are likely to perform above the average. From the standpoint of a future employer, good English skills are not only essential for work in a global market, but also proof of a very welcome versatility in a technical professional.

The positive acceptance on the part of the students can be gauged on the basis of two elements: the willingness to enroll in the programme and to continue with it, and the comments made in the anonymous, written questionnaires distributed at regular intervals throughout the programme. The actual number of participants in the eight courses, after a rapid increase in the Pilot Phase, has remained constant over the past few years, while the total number of new enrollments at the FHM has decreased in line with demographic trends. This indicates that, proportionally, demand for the Certificate has tended to increase.

The students' responses to the questionnaires have always provided valuable input for course evaluation and adjustment. Apart from the occasional complaint about the quantity of subject matter to be studied, most comments are favourable and focus on five types of benefits:

- receiving an insight into economics and business topics which are otherwise not addressed by the technical degree chosen;
- getting instruction in receptive (listening and reading comprehension) and productive (speaking, writing) skills in specially designed courses;
- developing English language skills in particular, and by virtue of transfer, verbal skills in general, which represents a welcome contrast to the methodological approach of a technical degree course;
- benefiting from individual attention from the teacher in the classes in which the number of participants is limited;
- getting to know, over the eight courses, students from other departments and thus receiving an insight into different disciplines and careers.

Of the five areas above, four can be seen as inherent to the Certificate programme, whereas the last one appears of a more general nature. Interdisciplinary courses of this kind are excellent practice for the future job of any technical professional. In fact, this may well be the benchmark for the success of the Certificate: improving the ability to communicate beyond the boundaries of a technical field, of a company, and of a country.

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